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Stucco reliefs of Scenes from the Shahnama in a fort at Bandar-e Taheri (Siraf)

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Abstract

One of the most distinctive features of the Iranian Gulf is the line of forts which extends along the coastline from Bushehr to Bandar Abbas. One of these forts built by the local Al-Nasouri sheikhs in the late 19th to early 20th century is located to the west of Bandar-e Taheri near the site of the medieval port of Siraf. The fort was well-constructed with massive brick walls and towers enclosing courtyards for public and private use. The most remarkable feature of the fort is a balcony decorated with eighteen scenes from the Shahnama in moulded and carved stucco. They represent events from the lives of the great heroes such as Rustam, scenes with rulers such as Anushiravan etc. They date from the early 20th century and were probably adapted and copied from the illustrations to lithographed texts of the Shahnama. As yet they are unique both as examples of pictorial interpretation of the Shahnama and of Qajar decoration.

I propose to present and discuss this group of Shahnama scenes. My lecture will be illustrated with 35 mm colour slides.

One of the most distinctive features of the Iranian Gulf is the line of forts which extends along the coast from Bushehr to Bandar Abbas. One of these forts built by the local Al-Nasouri sheikhs in the late 19th to early 20th centuries is located to the west of Bandar-e Taheri near the site of the medieval port of



Siraf (1). Their descendants continued to use the fort as their residence until it was abandoned sometime during the 1980s (2). The fort was well-constructed with massive brick walls and towers enclosing courtyards for public and private use. The most remarkable feature of the fort is a balcony, located in the upper storey of the west side of the south courtyard, decorated with eighteen scenes from the **Shahnama** in moulded and carved stucco. As yet no known parallel with this extraordinary pictorial narrative has been identified in the remains of forts along either the Iranian or the Arab coasts of the Gulf.

The fort replaced an older structure which according to the supplement of the Persian Gulf Pilot, a navigational reference aid, of 1905 had been demolished. This suggests that the fort was probably built sometime after 1905 and at the latest by 1922 (3) The fort was certainly fully established by 1933 when Aurel Stein on archaeological survey work, camped in Taheri from 11 to 19 June “on an old-walled up terrace below the fortified mansion of Sheikh Hatim, the local chief” (4) His photograph of the fort corresponds exactly with the present building(5) Assuming that the **Shahnama** stucco reliefs are contemporary with the fort, they are remarkable examples of the survival of a traditional form of decoration and iconographical themes well into the 20th century. The balcony which they adorn, of a

simple rectangular plan, is entered through a door at the top of the stairs of the south-west corner of the fort, which leads into a long vestibule open on the east side overlooking the courtyard. The long west side is interrupted by five evenly spaced pairs of wooden doors each surmounted by a semicircular fan light of coloured glass within a wooden frame. On the east side four equally spaced full columns and two semi-engaged columns support five arches. The columns, all varied in form and shape are covered with moulded and carved stucco; the central pair are octagonal with vertical bands, while the outer and semi-engaged ones are circular with oblique fluted bands. All have elaborate **muqarnas** stalactite capitals which lead to the arches decorated on their inner surfaces with stucco panels of floral motifs and foliate tendrils. The stucco itself is formed from a fine-textured buff plaster applied over a mortar base covering the original brick and then moulded, carved and incised according to the requirements of the design. The most intricate work, however, is reserved for the inner walls of the balcony where a carefully articulated scheme of rich foliage ornament frames the **Shahnama** panels. Common to all three sides is a deep cornice of repeated pairs of winged flying figures holding bouquets of flowers above a continuous garland of swagged and beribboned roses carved in prominent relief. Below the cornice foliage is trained into bouquets and sprays of carnations and poppies with

birds perched among them, to fill the spandrels and borders around the panels. Here the stucco has been worked in a combination of moulding and carving on various levels to create a rich naturalistic effect emphasised by incised detail on petals and leaves. There is also a dado of approximately one third of each wall's height covered with stucco lightly carved into a pattern simulating either neat courses of brickwork or a crazy paving of interlocking triangles. There are no traces of colour on the stucco which relies for effect on the contrast between light and shade through different levels of relief (6).

The eighteen narrative panels are aligned in vertical pairs within the decorative frame:-

1. 1-2 and 3-4 on each side of the door of the south wall
2. 5-6,7-8,9-10,11-12 flank the three central doors of the west wall
3. 13-14,15-16,17-18 are along the north wall

Each panel has a simple shape; a rectangular (2,4,14,16,18), semicircular (1,3,13,15,17) or a vertical cartouche (5-12) all within a coiled or ribbed moulded border. All of the scenes are identifiable with either episodes, principal characters and associates of the **Shahnama** :-

1. Rustam killing Esfandiyar

Rustam shoots arrows into the eyes of Prince Esfandiyar, son of Shah Goshtasp, a legendary king of Iran.

2. The death of Rustam

Shahgad, Rustam's treacherous half-brother. lures Rustam into a trap lined with knives and swords. Before dying Rustam kills Shagad by shooting an arrow into his heart.

3. Sohrab seeks the identity of Rustam

Sohrab, Rustam's son, leads the Turanian army against the Iranians. He asks an Iranian soldier the names of his leaders in order to identify Rustam.

4. Rustam killing Sohrab

Rustam has defeated Sohrab in single combat, each unaware of the other's identity. Rustam recognizes his dying son too late from an amulet inscribed with his name.

5. Rustam rescuing Bizhan from the pit

The Iranian Bizhan has fallen in love with Manizha, daughter of the Turanian king Afrasiyab. As punishment he is thrown into a pit. Rustam here pulls him up with a rope.



6. Rustam kicking the rock

Bahman, the son of Esfandiyar, discovers Rustam feasting and drinking. He tries to kill Rustam by rolling a rock down on him. Rustam simply kicks it away, proof of his enormous strength.

7. Key Khosrau enthroned

Key Khosrau was the son of the Iranian prince Siyavosh and the Turanian princess Farangis. His reign was famous for justice and mercy.

8. Rustam and his father Zal

Rustam's ancestry is illustrious. Zal is ruler of the eastern province of Sistan and the son of the great warrior Sam. Rustam's mother, Rudaba, is the daughter of the ruler of Kabul.

9. Prince Siyavosh hunting

Prince Siyavosh goes to the court of Afrasiyab, ruler of the Turanians, and eventually marries his daughter Farangis. He displays his skill in both playing polo and hunting.

10. Giv and Gaudarz

Giv and Gaudarz, warriors at the courts of the rulers Key Kavus and Key Khosrau, are secondary but important characters who ensure that the main story continues.

11. Prince Siyavosh's ordeal by fire

Sudaba, stepmother of Siyavosh son of the Iranian ruler Key Kavus, falls in

Love with him. When accused Siyavosh and his horse emerge unharmed from fire thus proving his innocence.

12. Rustam killing the White Elephant

Zal's white elephant runs wild. Rustam kills it using the mace of his grandfather Sam.

13. Anushiravan enthroned

Anushiravan, like Key Khusrau, ruled justly and reformed Iran's tax system.

14. The Div Akhvan throwing Rustam into the Ocean

One of Rustam's seven heroic deeds. He tricks Akhvan into throwing him into the ocean rather than hurling him on to a mountain.

15. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (998-1030)enthroned

Sultan Mahmud ruled territories extending from Isfahan to Lahore. Firdausi, after 35 years of work, completed the **Shahnama** c.1010 A.D. and presented it to Mahmud in the hope of patronage.



16. The meeting of Ferdousi with Sultan Mahmud's court poets

This refers to an event recorded in the biography of Ferdousi compiled by Prince Baisunqur in the early 15th century. Ferdousi joins the three poets in a garden. They shun him until he completes a line of verse, which is inscribed on the plaque which he holds. They then welcome him and later introduce him to Sultan Mahmud.

17. Key Kavus and his grandson Key Khosrau seated

Key Khosrau was crowned as ruler of Iran during his grandfather's lifetime. Here they are shown as equal in status and the scene probably refers to their meeting to discuss the problem of their joint enemy Afrasiyab.

18. Rustam's combat with the White Div

This is the last of Rustam's seven heroic deeds. He rescues the ruler Key Kavus from the White Div who had kidnapped and blinded him.

All of the figures are conveniently identified by name and caption written in Persian in a squat **nastaliq** script within circular or square medallions placed above or beside them.

The scenes invite many lines of discussion concerning artistic technique and convention, identification and importance of scenes, source and date. All of the figures and inscriptions have been moulded in bold relief against a smooth plain ground. Bevelled edges, however, soften the abrupt transition between levels while details of calligraphy, features, textures and folds of clothing are worked in shallow relief and boldly incised strokes. This technique enables the characters to be depicted clearly and the space used to best advantage. A flat cartoon-like treatment has been chosen for the figures, with frontal poses and little regard for perspective and proportion in relation to the size of horses and elephants. Compositions are formal and static focused on the principal character with supporting figures grouped symmetrically around him. Available space is exploited by foreshortening animals or by depicting them in part only; thus in the scenes with Rustam and Sohrab (4) only the front halves of their horses are shown.

The scenery and action around the figures is streamlined and simplified; rocks and tents are treated as triangular peaks in outline and parallel strokes. Bizhan's and Rustam's pits are enclosed loops(2,5). Onlookers peer down at the main action from behind rocks (6) or from windows (11,12) sometimes with hands raised in the classic gesture of astonishment. There is



little attempt at individual treatment of features. All have long narrow eyes and prominent noses; seasoned warriors have handlebar moustaches (e.g. 1,4) young men may be cleanshaven (9.11), while clothing also aids identification – rulers and dignitaries wear crowns, turbans and long robes, warriors have armour of a type worn from the 17th to early 19th centuries and a range of helmets. Rustam is immediately identified by his long forked beard, his leopard cap, bow, quiver and bull-headed mace (e.g. 6,8,12). Skilful use of moulds to duplicate certain features is a time and effort-saving device. Here, for example, Rustam and Zal (8), Giv and Gaudarz (10) are seated in identical poses on identical chairs.

The presence of this remarkable stucco panorama of the **Shahnama** at such a late date in the Qajar period and in such an apparently unlikely place, is an impressive witness to the vitality of the great epic as a continuing pictorial source for a robust popular art. Although, however, the **Shahnama** mingles myth, romance, heroism and historical narratives of Iran's Sassanian kings in an inexhaustible choice of subject to artists and craftsmen, certain themes are repeated constantly because they have a strong narrative and emotional appeal, and can be depicted effectively in pictorial form. Rustam, the national hero, famous for his miraculous birth, his superhuman strength and

his endless battles on behalf of Iran is the most popular and celebrated hero. He is also a flawed tragic figure who abandons his wife Tahmina, kills his son Sohrab and stupidly falls into the trap set by Shahgad. The choice here apart from the two scenes of the presentation of Ferdousi's poem to Sultan Mahmud(15,16) is devoted to the **Shahnama** in a balance between action and repose. Eleven of the scenes depict **Shahnama** episodes (1-6, 11-12,14, 18) of which eight directly feature Rustam as the man of action (1-2,4-6,12,14,18) and three the young men Sohrab, Bizhan and Siyavosh (3,5,11). He is shown both in his great moments of courage and sacrifice – rescuing Bizhan (5) outwitting wild animals and demons (12,14) his victory over the White Div (18) and in his failures – the killing of Sohrab (4) falling into Shahgad's trap (2); even here he makes one last effort and summons up the strength to kill his betrayer. The action of these main scenes is tempered by the two prefaces and five more tranquil scenes which although they feature important mythical and historical characters, such as Anushiravan and Key Khosrau - enthroned and seated do not stress any specific event (7-10,13,17). Within this sequence of alternation of action and repose the placement of each scene does not follow the order of the poem; for example, Rustam's killing of the White Elephant and his combat with the White Div are respectively first and second in the poem and twelfth and



eighteenth in the reliefs. The two preface scenes (15,16) are framed between two of Rustam's deeds (14,18). This arbitrary order means that the scenes can be "read" as a sequence in either direction or as self-contained stories according to the viewer's choice.

The stucco reliefs in terms of their technical and artistic accomplishment are the confident product of a patron and craftsmen who had access to a sophisticated illustrated source. Although the **Shahnama** was so widely admired in Iranian cultural life at all levels, illustrated editions were luxury products reserved for a narrow elite circle. The introduction, however, of the process of lithography into Ira during the 1840s drastically changed the situation enabling copies of the classic texts to be produced quickly and cheaply and widely circulated (7). The **Shahnama** was an obvious case for treatment and many lithographed editions were printed during the 19th and early 20th centuries in Tabriz and Tehran and also copied in India – at Delhi, Bombay and Lucknow. Two of the most important and copiously illustrated editions were printed in 1849 one in Tehran, the other in Bombay (8). These in turn were frequently reprinted including a re-lithographed edition of 1913 at Bombay (9). In comparing the stucco scenes with the illustrations of various editions it is clear that those printed in

Bombay supplied the main sources, which however were adapted and interpreted rather than directly copied. Features in the 1849 edition such as the style of crowns, turbans and robes , treatment of faces and placement of figures have been observed and then simplified to suit the techniques and limitations of stucco moulding and carving where the fine hatched and shaded detail of the lithograph could not be reproduced.

An analysis of some of the principal scenes indicate how the text illustrations have been interpreted. Detailed treatment of interior furnishing, clothing, ornament and the outdoor scene has been eliminated. Ferdousi's audience with Sultan Mahmud and his court poets has been sharply divided into two scenes by a fringed lattice border (**Plates 11-12 & 16**) and the composition is static with two attendants flanking Mahmud to fill the space and balance the figures below. Rustam's exploits are similarly varied. His killing of the White Elephant (**Plates 9 & 17**) keeps the asymmetry of the illustration but the figures are cut and aligned to suit the vertical format of the panel. The treatment of Rustam's killing of Sohrab (**Plates 5 & 18**) has effectively reduced the original to the minimum. Rustam's victory over the White Div (**Plates 14 & 19**) has also been reduced to a vertical composition of the two protagonists, their positions have been reversed and the bewildered Div grasps at a bulbous tree for



support. Despite the obvious debt of the stucco reliefs to the Bombay edition of the **Shahnama** which version was used? The illustrated lithographed text was deservedly popular requiring continual reprinting both of the original and other revised and embellished versions such as the Bombay edition of 1913. While retaining the format and composition of the early editions this one crowds the scenes with extra figures and fussy detail but is closer to the stucco reliefs in interpretation. In the context of the date of the fort, which was built between 1912 and 1922, and the close contact of Taheri's inhabitants with India it is reasonable to assume that a copy of the 1913 edition was acquired either directly in Bombay or from Bushire still at that time the main port of entry for merchandise from the sub-continent.

Many questions still remain unanswered such as the circumstances which led to the commissioning of these elaborate stucco reliefs, the financial resources allocated to the project, the identity of the craftsmen and their terms of employment. The intentions of the patron are tantalisingly elusive. It seems probable that the balcony was a display area of both the family's status and connections where guests would be suitably impressed by the cultural references of the **Shahnama**.

Footnotes

1. I stayed in the fort from October 1968 to January 1969 cataloguing the small finds of the third season at Siraf which gave me the opportunity to study the remarkable series of stucco reliefs. I acknowledge with gratitude the support of Dr. David Whitehouse in supplying me with information about the background history of the fort and the set of photographs used in this article, and of the Royal Scottish Museum Edinburgh (now the Royal Museum of Scotland, National Museums of Scotland) in granting me generous study leave.
2. I am grateful to Warwick Ball for information on the condition of the fort in the 1980s.
3. Sheikh Naser Nasouri who occupied the fort during the 1960s claimed in 1967 that it was built by his grandfather with British money at during the 1914-18 war. Anecdotal information given to me by Dr. Whitehouse, letter of 7th July 1969.
4. Stein, Sir Aurel, *Archaeological Reconnaissances in North-western and South-eastern Iran*, London 1937, p.202
5. Stein op. cit. plate 60
6. During the later part of the reign of Nasiruddin Shah Qajar (1848-96) monochrome stucco fashioned into very elaborate designs of flower bouquets and garlands became very fashionable. Good examples of this style are in the Gulestan



palace, and the Bagh-I Ferdous – a garden pavilion in the north of Tehran.

7. See Robinson, B. W., *The Tehran Nizami and other Qajar lithographed books in Islam in the Balkans and Persian Art and Culture of the 18th and 19th centuries*, Edinburgh 1979 (edited by Jennifer Scarce) pp 61-74 for an excellent account of this change.

8. Lithographed editions of the *Shahnama* in the British Library :Tehran 1849/50 copied by Mustafa Quli b. Muhammad under the direction of Hajji Muhammad Husayn Tehrani, 596 folios, 57 illustrations by Ali Quli Khoyi (2 signed) (reg.no. 757.1.4); Bombay 1849, illustrations by Ali Akbar (reg. no. 14807.h.4). I am grateful to B. W. Robinson for suggesting lithograph illustrations as a possible source.

9. Bombay 1913, Lithograph from the original manuscript and paintings of Aga Awalia Sami Shirazi compiled by Irani Amuzanda Shirmand Nauzar, 10 Frere Road and 218 Bazaar Gate Street, Fort, Bombay (India Office Library London reg.no.306.34.G.16)